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ABSTRACT

The study examined sex differences in the influence of perceived evaluations of self by various types of referent others upon self-esteem. Distinctions were made between authority and peer relationships and between close and distant relationships. The status dimension proved particularly important for males, their variation in self-esteem being primarily accounted for by perceived peer appraisals (in both close and distant relationships). On the other hand, the intimacy dimension appeared to be most critical for females, their self-esteem levels being largely a function of perceived appraisals of close others (both authorities and peers). (Author)

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Sex Differences in the Social Bases of Self-Esteem

David C. Lundgren and Mary R. Schwab

For years social scientists have shown an interest in testing the social self theories developed by Mead and Cooley. Mead's formulation suggests that, through a process of role-taking the individual comes to form his self-concept by defining his behavior in terms of expectations and reactions of others. Cooley, in a parallel manner, describes the individual's self-image as a product of the reflected appraisals of others (the "looking glass self").

One adaptation of various hypotheses derived from this framework is that of Miller (1963), who distinguishes between "subjective public-esteem", the individual's perception of others' evaluation of him in given social contexts, and "self-esteem", the individual's evaluation of himself. Thus, a central theme in the Mead-Cooley hypothesis can be rephrased to state that one's self-esteem (SE) is a reflection of his subjective public-esteem (SPE).

While there is considerable documentation that SE and SPE are closely interrelated (cf., Miyamoto & Dornbusch, 1956), there have also been studies which demonstrate that the degree to which SE corresponds to SPE may well be a function of particular features of the social relationships involved (cf., Mannheim, 1966).

Attempts to classify various dimensions of social or interpersonal relationships have suggested that two dimensions are of particular importance. These will be termed here "status" and "intimacy" (see Swensen, 1973, for a review of pertinent literature). The status dimension refers to the degree to which individuals in a relationship are differentiated in terms of authority, power, or prestige. The intimacy dimension refers

to the extent to which relationships between individuals can be characterized as close, personal, and informal.

In a broader study (Lundgren & Schwab, 1973), from which the present data have been drawn, it was found that the degree to which SE corresponds to SPE is contingent upon the status and intimacy characteristics of the relationships involved. In particular, discrepancies between SPE and SE were significantly smaller in close authority than in distant authority relationships. The purpose of the present analysis is to examine sex differences with respect to relationships between SPE and SE. Specifically, the paper focuses upon the relative influence of SPE in close and distant authority and peer relationships upon the self-esteem of males and females.

Method

Subjects. The subjects were 82 male and 82 female volunteers from the introductory psychology course at the University of Cincinnati.

Procedure and measures. The data gathered in six administrations of a 30-minute questionnaire. The research was described as a study of interpersonal perception. Four types of social relationships were presented in a four-cell matrix, consisting of one axis labelled "authority" and "peer", and the second axis labelled "close" and "distant". Subjects were asked to think of four specific persons whom they knew well and who knew them well. Each subject thus identified a "close authority", a "distant authority", a "close peer", and a "distant peer".

Subjects were first instructed to judge how each of the four referent others "would describe you on the trait mentioned," then to "mark the response which best represents how you would describe yourself on the trait mentioned."

Eight trait dimensions, drawn from several prior studies of self-concept and person perception, were used. These were: friendliness, independence, physical attractiveness, intelligence, openness, leadership ability, insightfulness, and emotional stability. The 5 response alternatives ranged from "high" to "low". Total scores for SE and SPE were computed by weighting responses from 5 (high) to 1 (low) and then summing each subject's weighted responses over the 8 dimensions.

Results

The means and standard deviations for subjective public-esteem (SPE) and self-esteem (SE) scores for males and females are presented in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

For both males and females, the intimacy dimension appears to be critical in determining the evaluative direction of the relationship between SPE and SE. In all comparisons, mean SPE scores with reference to close peers and close authority figures are significantly more favorable than mean SE scores ($p<.005$ by 2-tailed t-tests). On the other hand, SPE scores for distant peer and authority relationships tend to be significantly lower than SE scores for both sexes ($p<.005$ by 2-tailed t-tests in all comparisons except SE vs. SPE for distant authority for females: $t=1.74$, $p<.10$). Thus, both males and females tend to regard themselves less positively than they believe close others view them, and more favorably than they believe distant others view them.

Stepwise multiple regression analyses were used to examine the inter-relationships between the 4 types of SPE scores, as predictor variables,

and SE scores, as the dependent variable. Results of the parallel analyses for males and females are given in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

The multiple correlations between the 4 SPE variables and SE are strongly significant for both sexes (for males, $F=24.90$, $p<.001$; for females, $F=23.34$, $p<.001$). In combination, the 4 SPE variables accounted for 56% of the variance in male SE scores and 55% of the variance in female SE scores.

Comparison of the ordering of predictor variables and their associated beta coefficients appears to indicate an important sex difference. For males, SPE scores with reference to the two types of peer relationships account for 54% of the variance in SE scores, while inclusion of the close and distant authority SPE scores explains only an additional 2.6% of the variance. For females, on the other hand, the two SPE variables for close relationships account for 50% of the variance in SE scores, and the SPE variables for distant authority and peer relations account for only a further 4.5% of the variance.

Discussion

The principal findings concern comparisons between males and females in the ordering of the SPE variables as predictors of SE. Considering the intimacy dimension alone, the self-esteem of both males and females appears to be more strongly affected within the context of close relationships than in distant relationships. That is, for males, SPE scores for close peers are more strongly weighted than for distant peers, and SPE scores for close authorities are more strongly weighted than for

distant authorities. Comparable trends occur for females on the intimacy dimension.

However, a reversal between the sexes occurs on the status dimension. In predicting male SE scores, SPE for close and distant peers are weighted considerably more than SPE for close and distant authorities. In contrast, for females, SPE scores for close and distant authorities are weighted more strongly in comparison with close and distant peers. Thus, with respect to the status dimension, it would appear that SE of males is most directly a function of the perceived appraisals of peers, while females are more directly influenced by the perceived reactions of authority figures.

In interpreting these findings, it seems necessary to examine the different social responses to males and females in the broader culture. While both sexes are dependent on the mother in the early months of life, males proceed from dependency to internalization of the male role, while the female continues in her feminine identification. Various studies (Flammer & Matas, 1972; Forslund & Hull, 1972; Hartley, 1959; Lewis, 1972) indicate that intuitive-feeling behavior, intimate physical and verbal contact, and dependency are rewarded more in females than in males; while males exhibiting exploratory, independent, aggressive behavior are more likely to be reinforced. In addition, competition and a need to identify with masculine role models are highly important in males (Forslund & Hull, 1972; Lewis, 1972), whereas esteem in females may be more related to the social environment through interpersonal closeness and external support (Lewis, 1972; Veroff, 1969).

Assuming greater autonomy and less dependence upon authority figures to be an outcome of socialization for males, one would expect their self-esteem to be more a function of SPE of peers than of authorities. Conversely,

females are socialized both to be more dependent and to display more expressiveness and intimacy in their interactions with others. They would be more likely, then, to be influenced by those to whom they feel close, particularly authority figures. Thus, it is likely that differential socialization explains the differing social bases for self-esteem in males and females found in this study.

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Table 1

Mean Subjective Public-Esteem (SPE) and Self-Esteem (SE) Scores

	SPE (close peer)	SPE (close authority)	SPE (self-esteem)	SPE (distant peer)	SPE (distant authority)
Males	32.1	31.0	29.9	28.6	28.3
Females	31.9	31.4	28.8	27.5	28.0

Table 2

Stepwise Multiple Regression Analyses between the Four Subjective Public-Esteem(SPE) Variables and Self-Esteem (SE) for Males and Females

	Multiple R	R^2	R^2 Change	Simple R	Beta
	Males				
SPE (close Peer)	.672	.452	.452	.672	.422
SPE (Distant Peer)	.734	.539	.087	.566	.274
SPE (Close Authority)	.750	.562	.024	.560	.190
SPE (Distant Authority)	.751	.564	.002	.384	.052
	Females				
SPE (Close Authority)	.628	.394	.394	.628	.378
SPE (Close Peer)	.710	.504	.110	.612	.289
SPE (Distant Authority)	.737	.543	.040	.487	.202
SPE (Distant Peer)	.740	.548	.005	.431	.083